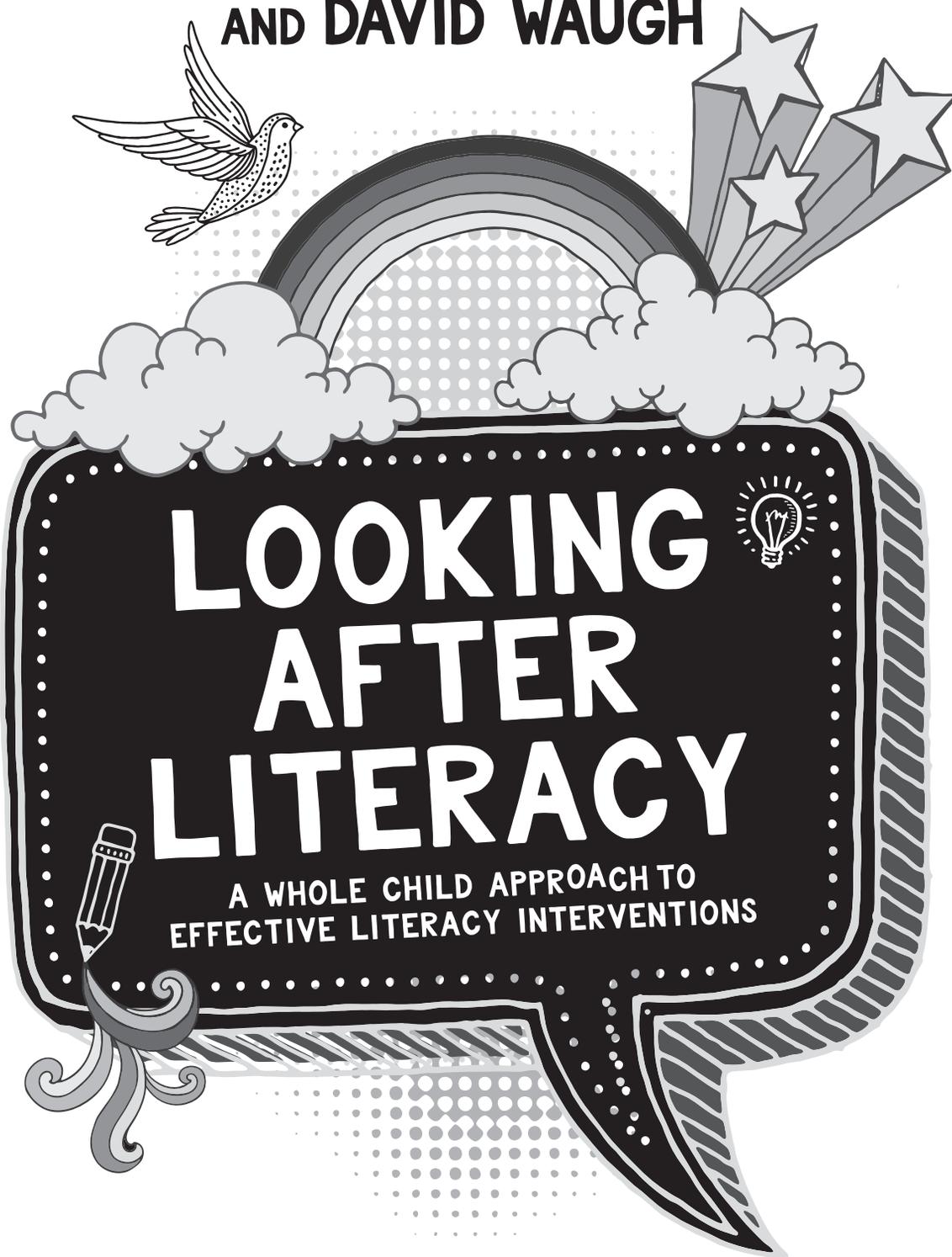


**CAROLINE WALKER-GLEAVES
AND DAVID WAUGH**



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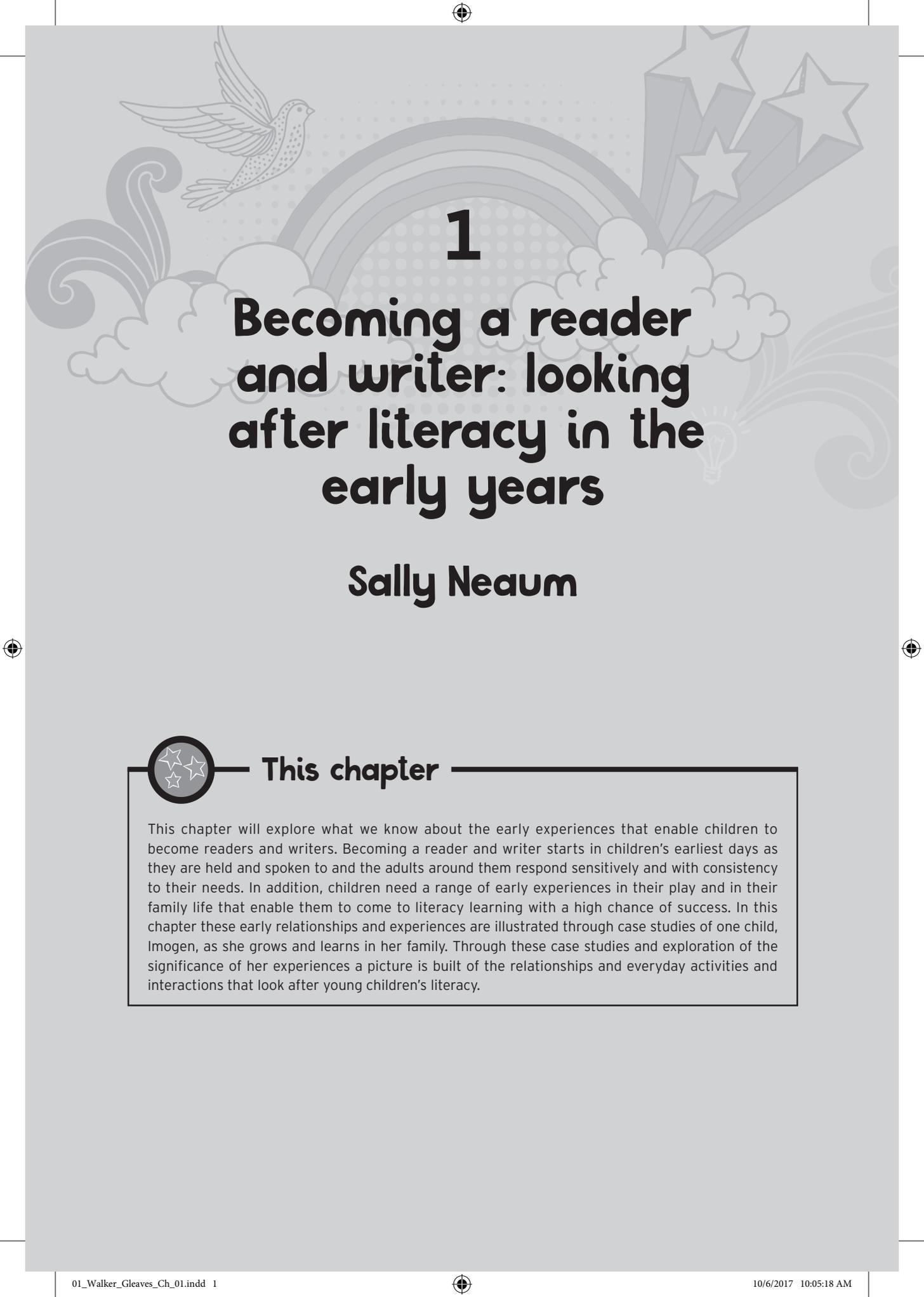
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1

Becoming a reader and writer: looking after literacy in the early years

Sally Neaum



This chapter

This chapter will explore what we know about the early experiences that enable children to become readers and writers. Becoming a reader and writer starts in children's earliest days as they are held and spoken to and the adults around them respond sensitively and with consistency to their needs. In addition, children need a range of early experiences in their play and in their family life that enable them to come to literacy learning with a high chance of success. In this chapter these early relationships and experiences are illustrated through case studies of one child, Imogen, as she grows and learns in her family. Through these case studies and exploration of the significance of her experiences a picture is built of the relationships and everyday activities and interactions that look after young children's literacy.



Case study

Understanding children's reading 'biographies'

Imogen is now five years old and has just begun Year 1. She loves school. She is able to read and enjoy early chapter books, although sometimes prefers to share the reading, reading alternate pages with an adult. Today she got 8/8 in her first spelling test. At the end of her reception she had made wonderful progress with phonics and was able to apply her knowledge and skills from this in her reading and writing. She was always delighted to read to her teacher who commented that it was a pleasure to listen to her reading as she was developing fluency and would share her thoughts on what she had read. Imogen had lots of ideas for her writing and thought carefully about the presentation of her work. She was able to use some punctuation and make good phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words, for example 'orinj joos' (orange juice), 'rais' (race) and 'enjen' (engine).

At home Imogen has a range of favourite books, rhymes and songs that she knows off by heart. She looks at her books on her own and is able to read some of the text. She sits engrossed, sucking her fingers, as books are read to her. She finishes each day with a bedtime story. Her current favourite book, *Maps* (Mizielinska and Mizielinski, 2013), produces discussion about animals and plants, geographical features, cultural events and places of interest around the world. Imogen is very chatty. She can initiate conversation and respond in discussion, recall things that have happened, recount incidents, and joke and play with language and words. She asks myriad questions, and answers questions fully and with interest, often including her own ideas and opinions. Imogen loves role-play and uses her emerging writing skills in her play, for example, writing down appointments and prescriptions at the opticians, taking orders in a cafe, and writing numerals and number words as a judge while watching *Strictly Come Dancing* on the TV.

It is clear that Imogen has moved into school with ease, and is becoming literate with success. She is able to confidently leave her parents at the start of the day, to manage her needs in school and to regulate her behaviour so that she is able to meet the school's expectations. So what has enabled this to happen? What early experiences have enabled Imogen to start school and learn with confidence? And how has her literacy been looked after in her early years so that she has moved into becoming literate with ease, enjoyment and success?

Ready to learn

Research shows us that there are a number of important relationships and experiences that contribute to children being able to learn at school. These happen in children's families and communities long before they start school. These necessary early experiences include the development of:

- bonding and attachment;
- executive function skills;
- physical skills: balance, proprioception, crossing the midline and sensory awareness and integration.

Bonding and attachment

School readiness has as much to do with social and emotional development as cognitive development. (Moullin et al., 2014, p.7)

John Bowlby (1953, p.13), author of the original report from which the concepts of bonding and attachment emerged, describes it thus:

An infant and young child should experience a warm intimate and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in whom both find satisfaction and enjoyment.

Bonding and attachment are fundamental to a child's flourishing. They create a secure base from which a child can explore, learn and relate to others. The security that they bring enables children to learn how to manage their own feelings and behaviour, and develop confidence and self-reliance. Bonding and attachment develop in a child's earliest years from warm, sensitive and consistent care from adults. This includes everyday interactions such as holding the child, making eye contact, smiling, singing, laughing, talking and playing, as well as anticipating their physical needs to be warm, clean, fed and safe. This 'tuning into' a child and responding to their needs provides the child with a dependable source of comfort, and reassures them that they are lovable and their needs will be met (Moullin et al., 2014). This warm, responsive care is internalised by the child and forms the basis of their ability to regulate their feelings and guide their behaviour as they grow and learn.

There is strong international evidence that secure bonds and attachment have a positive impact on children's learning at school (Moullin et al., 2014). This security fosters the development of skills that enable children to move out into the world with confidence in skills such as self-reliance, autonomy and resilience. It has also been shown to have a positive impact on children's language development that is fundamental to learning. It is thought that the reason for this is the adult's interest and enjoyment in interaction with the child, and the child's receptiveness and motivation to learn from the adult. In addition a secure bond has an impact on the development of executive function and self-regulation skills (Moullin et al., 2014): the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions and juggle multiple tasks successfully (Harvard University, 2016).

Executive function skills

Executive functioning skills are necessary for learning, and are a strong predictor of children's readiness and ability to learn at school (Whitebread and Bingham, 2014; Blair and Diamond, 2008). School-based learning requires the ability to filter distractions, prioritise tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses (Harvard University, 2016). It is the development of executive function skills that enable children to achieve this. Executive function has a number of aspects:

- Working memory: this governs our ability to retain and manipulate distinct pieces of information over short periods of time.
- Mental flexibility: this helps us to sustain or shift attention in response to different demands or to apply different rules in different settings.
- Self-control: this enables us to set priorities and resist impulsive actions or responses.

Young children learn these skills in everyday interactions in the home and at pre-school (Bernier et al., 2010; Whitebread and Basilio, 2012). They develop through reliable, supportive and responsive interaction that establishes daily routines, scaffolds a child's growing independence and models appropriate social interaction. The development of these skills is closely aligned with bonding and attachment as it requires adults who are 'tuned in' and responsive to a child's needs to scaffold and mediate tasks and experiences, so that a child can become increasingly independent and able to self-regulate, plan, focus and persist.



Case study

Developing executive function skills

Imogen, aged 18 months, has decided that she wants to choose her own clothes and dress herself. She has a clear idea about what she wants to wear and is adamant that she is going to do it 'on my own'. At times this works well. At other times it doesn't: Imogen chooses clothes that are not suitable for the weather or the day's activities, and she finds some aspects of dressing herself, such as pulling things over her head, buttons and zips, frustrating. Helen, Imogen's mum, supports Imogen's desire to become more independent in dressing herself in a number of ways.

- With a routine of talking about what they are going to do that day and looking out of the window at the weather to decide what sort of clothing is needed, Imogen then chooses which clothes to wear within some boundaries.
- Initially Helen chooses two or three things for Imogen to put on herself and is helped with the others. Helen guided Imogen towards the simpler items of clothing so she can practise and gain confidence in her ability to dress herself. As Imogen has become more skilled and confident she can now put more of the items on without help.
- For the tricky aspects such as buttons and zips Helen uses opportunities that arise to model how she manages these on her own clothes, and Imogen helps her. When dressing herself Imogen started by doing one button or finishing fastening a zip that Helen had started, and now does more as her confidence and fine motor skills have developed.
- When Imogen becomes frustrated by not being able to do something, they have agreed that she will have three goes on her own before they do it together.

Through these interactions Helen scaffolds Imogen's learning. She acknowledges Imogen's desire to do things independently and adapts her interaction to facilitate this. She focuses Imogen's attention on making appropriate choices, supports her in using her fine and gross motor skills in

new ways, and encourages Imogen to focus on the task and persist when it is frustrating. These 'tuned-in' interactions enable Imogen to complete tasks successfully, engender confidence in her ability and increase her level of autonomy and independence. This mediated learning enables Imogen to become increasingly independent, able to plan, focus, persist and self-regulate, all of which are important early executive function skills.

Physical skills that support learning

Learning is not all in the mind but requires a range of physical skills, and evidence suggests that a number of these are highly significant in children's ability to engage in learning (Reeves and Bailey, 2014; Pagini, 2012; Goddard Blythe, 2000, 2011, 2012).

Balance

Children need to have a strong sense of balance both when moving and sitting still. Balance is controlled through our vestibular system that provides sensory information about motion, equilibrium and spatial orientation. Therefore we learn to balance by moving, by getting a sense of our body in space and gaining control over it. Gaining balance is important as once we have balance we can move more freely. This enables us to move and stay still without having to exercise conscious control over our bodies: our body is mind-free (Johnson, 2014). When children have had insufficient experiences for their body to be well balanced they will need to think and concentrate on maintaining balance and uprightness; their bodies are not yet mind-free, and this can inhibit focusing on, and attending to, other things.

Crossing the midline

The midline is an imaginary line that runs horizontally down the middle of our body, and 'crossing the midline' refers to any motor action that involves looking, reaching or stepping across this imaginary midline. Crossing the midline emerges as babies and young children develop bilateral integration: good communication between the left- and right-hand side of the brain. Children's ability to cross their midline is central to self-help skills such as getting dressed, physical activity that requires looking, reaching or stepping across the midline, and the development of a dominant side of the body. This leads into becoming literate as it is necessary to cross the midline when tracking left to right to read and write (O'Connor and Daly, 2016).

Sensory awareness and integration

Sensory awareness and integration refer to children's ability to receive and respond to information gathered through their senses. It includes the five external senses – touch, taste, sight, hearing and smell – and the internal vestibular and proprioceptive senses (O'Connor and Daly, 2016). Proprioception is the awareness of your body in space. When our proprioceptive system is adequately developed our proprioceptors (sensory nerve endings located in muscles, tendons, joints and the vestibular system) are constantly providing our brain with important spatial information

that enables us to sit still, pay attention and engage visually with text-based information (Johnson, 2014; Neaum, 2017). This sensory engagement with the world shapes neural pathways and we build our understanding of the world around us as we make ever more complex connections based on previous experiences and sensations. Thus babies and young children need rich sensory-motor experiences to build a strong foundation for later learning; they need to move-to-learn, to have the time, space and opportunities to take in information through their senses and piece it together. As Connell and McCarthy (2014, p.53) observe, sensory integration ‘greatly affects not only what a child perceives but also how he interprets, understands and responds to sensory information – in other words, how he learns.’

These physical skills that support learning begin in children’s earliest days. Babies need ‘tummy time’ – time spend in a prone position lying on their tummy on the floor – they need to crawl, and have opportunities to stand and fall, spin, roll and be upside down. They also need rich sensory experiences to stimulate their senses, such as skin-to-skin contact through holding, stroking and massaging, quiet singing and eye contact while feeding and dressing. Then, as they grow and develop, young children need wide ranging opportunities for vigorous activity and movement to develop physical foundations for learning (Neaum, 2017). This should include opportunities for jumping, hopping, dancing, swinging, spinning, mixing, scanning, building, reaching, placing, pushing and pulling, filling and stacking, hanging, balancing, climbing, crawling and being upside down.



Case study

Developing physical skills that support learning

Imogen has always loved being in the garden at home and at her grandparents’ house. When she goes outside she often just runs into the space. She spends time looking, running, stopping and running again. She climbs on the rockery and plays on the swing. She has a trampoline and can drop, sit and twirl in the air when jumping. She laughs and laughs when her older brother, Joe, jumps next to her and she is bounced about and has to work hard to stay upright. She has her own set of gardening tools and helps, in short bursts, with the gardening, digging, planting, cutting, and using the hose to water the plants. She enjoys doing running races with her dad, collecting leaves in the wheelbarrow with her Poppa, and putting the washing out with Granny. When they have a barbeque or a picnic in the garden she helps by fetching and carrying things up and down the steps to the kitchen and setting them out carefully.

In these everyday activities Imogen is developing a range of important physical skills that support her in being ready to learn. Through moving and stopping, bouncing, swinging, spinning, climbing, reaching, pushing and pulling she is learning about her body in space. She is moving to learn to balance, control her body and cross her midline. She is engaged in rich sensory experiences with the time and space to build her understanding of the world around her. All of which enables her to be ready to learn at school, to sit and focus on tasks, and have the skills necessary to becoming a reader and a writer; tracking left to right and across her midline, spatial awareness and bilaterality (Neaum, 2017). Imogen has *not* learned to sit still and focus by sitting still: she has accomplished this by engaging in vigorous activity and movement in her early years.

Becoming a reader and writer

In addition to important relationships and experiences that lead into learning, there are some more specific interactions and experiences that enable us to look after children's early literacy. Becoming literate begins in children's earliest days as they are held and talked to, and develops through interaction and engagement with meaningful literacy practices in their everyday lives and play (Edwards, 2014). Shea (2011) refers to these interactions and experiences in the home as *soft teaching*, in which parents encourage, respond, coach and answer questions, and children watch, reflect and ask as their curiosity is sparked by the behaviours of others, and replicate observed reading and writing behaviours in their play and interactions.

These important early interactions and experiences include:

- talking, enjoying books, rhymes, songs and poems, and language play;
- the ability to symbolise;
- understanding forms and functions of print;
- metalinguistic awareness;
- phonological awareness.

(Neaum, 2017)

Talking, books, rhymes, songs and poems, and language play

The most important aspect of looking after young children's early literacy is talking. Spoken language is the basis of all literacy learning, and a strong predictor of children's later school attainment (Basit et al., 2015). Language acquisition begins in the earliest days of life in our communication with babies through smiling, gazing, singing and chatting. Parents instinctively enter into this social relationship with the assumption that the baby is interested in, and capable of, communication. Indeed parents often engage with babies as if they are participating in the interaction by anticipating and modelling their contribution in the interaction. Babies respond reciprocally to these communicative acts in various ways: through becoming still and listening, through eye contact and gazing, and, as they grow and develop, through whole-body movements and vocalisations. This is evidence of a strong internal drive for babies to engage in communication and enter into social interaction. These powerful social communicative interactions are the beginnings of language acquisition and, when nurtured, enable children to acquire and develop spoken language with ease. Then, to enable young children to acquire and develop language successfully, they need to be alongside people who use language to explain, to discuss, to explore, to imagine, to express ideas and thoughts, who play with language through rhymes and jokes and word play. Put simply, they need to be alongside people who say more than is necessary (Neaum, 2012, 2017).



Case study

Talking with young children

Imogen, aged 13 months, and her granny are baking buns. They have gathered all the ingredients and set them out on the table. Before they begin they discuss what type of buns to make and agree on Imogen's favourites, vanilla buns with Nutella icing. They begin by gathering all the ingredients and equipment that they need. Throughout this process Imogen's granny talks out loud about what she is looking for, where they will find it, pondering whether they have everything that they need, pointing to and listing what they already have, and reading the recipe aloud to see what else they need. Finally, they have all they need and are ready to begin.

They begin by weighing the sugar. Imogen's granny asks her to get the bag of sugar and open it. Once opened they carefully pour the sugar onto the scales. Again, Imogen's granny talks through what they are doing and comments that they need to pour the sugar very carefully so that they don't spill it, and so that they can look carefully at the dial and weigh out the correct amount to put in the buns. As she pours the sugar onto the scales Imogen responds, 'Am am'.

Once the sugar has been weighed they do the same with the other ingredients. As Imogen points to and picks up each ingredient her granny tells her what it is and talks through what they are doing with it, this commentary includes articulating her own thought processes.

Eventually they get to the making and mixing. In the final stages they add the flour to the soft mixture and Imogen's granny comments that they need to use a metal spoon and fold it in very carefully to keep the air in the mixture so that the buns rise. Imogen tries to copy her granny's gentle folding in of the flour commenting, 'I are'.

In this short interaction there is a wealth of language experience. Imogen is listening and responding to questions, responding to what she hears and understands, expressing preferences and using non-verbal communication and her developing language to make herself understood. She is listening to commentary that involves a range of linguistic uses and structures as well as building her understanding of the world. Imogen and her granny are using language to interact and to create meaning together in the activity.

This is part of Imogen's ongoing experience with language in her family. From being a tiny baby Imogen was involved in interaction with others, initially through touch, eye contact, facial expressions, repeating of her noises and expressions, and gentle, soft talk to her. This became more animated and reciprocal as she became able to use simple gestures, vocalisations and facial expressions to communicate. With daily rich language experiences including talk, listening to language, practising her emerging skills, books, singing, rhymes and music, she rapidly became able to use words to communicate. At 13 months she is able to mediate her experiences through language and use language to communicate. We can anticipate that her language will become increasingly sophisticated as she grows and learns while immersed in language.

Halliday (1973) identifies seven functions of language. These describe a hierarchy in the ways that children use language. Initially, children learn and use language to meet their needs and get along with others. Halliday refers to this as pragmatic use: language that enables us to meet our material

needs ('I want . . .'), control the behaviour of others ('don't do that – mine') and interact socially with others. However, in addition to these pragmatic uses of language children need to be able to express their thoughts and ideas, and ask questions to elicit information about the world around them. Halliday (1973) refers to this as *mathetic language* and argues that these aspects of language are crucial to success in school, both to learn and to be taught successfully. This requires that children are involved in a range of rich language experiences, at home and in pre-school settings, that include opportunities to ask and answer questions, to ponder, discuss, describe and seek explanations. It requires that we go beyond a functional use of language to using language as a tool to extend and enrich young children's experiences.

In addition to immersion in talk in daily routines and in their play, an excellent way for young children to hear, use, practise and manipulate language is through books, songs, rhymes, poems and language play. These activities are a rich source of enjoyment that open up a child's experiences and offer authentic ways for them to hear and use language. They extend and enhance children's language capability by encouraging focused listening and responding, alerting children to rhyme and rhythm in language, introducing vocabulary, engaging children in playing with words and syntax, and providing opportunities for children to develop their pronunciation and fluency in speech (Neaum, 2017).

Therefore, looking after very young children's language acquisition and development requires that children are alongside adults who are tuned into their early communication and gestures, say more than is necessary and adapt their interaction to the child's abilities and needs. Children need opportunities to enjoy books, rhymes, songs and poems, and to play with language through jokes, riddles and language play, and, to engage in talking and interaction to practise and refine their developing language.

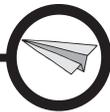
Symbolising and representation

Alongside the acquisition and development of spoken language, looking after young children's literacy requires that they have opportunities to become aware of literacy and what it means to read and write. One important aspect of this is the ability to symbolise. In anticipation of becoming literate children need to be able recognise and represent things symbolically.

The ability to use one thing to represent another is fundamental to literacy learning: writing is the symbolic representation of spoken language, and reading is understanding and decoding symbols that represent speech. Vygotsky (in Rieber and Hall, 1997) makes a distinction between first-order and second-order symbolism. First-order symbols can be understood directly: the symbols directly signify the objects or actions. For example, when we see a line drawing of a dog we recognise it as a dog. It clearly isn't a real dog but we can 'read' and understand this symbol for a dog. This is because there is a direct relationship between what we see and the object that it represents.

Second-order symbolism is more complex. Second-order symbols are more indirect and opaque. In terms of literacy they consist of 'written signs for oral symbols of words' (Vygotsky, in Rieber and Hall, 1997, p.142). For example, we use the symbols *d / o / g* to represent the object of a dog, and when we see this combination of symbols we recognise it as representing a dog. In contrast if we were presented with the symbols *σκύλος* it would have no meaning for us as English speakers and readers

because we cannot understand this combination of symbols. This is because writing uses second-order symbols, which means that they bear no resemblance to the object that they represent: the symbols are indirect. Young children need to develop this ability to use symbols to represent the world to enable them to come to reading and writing with a good chance of success (Neaum, 2017). This ability develops through the early use of gesture, through learning to talk, through concrete experiences in play that require symbolic use of props and equipment, and through early mark-making and drawing.



Case study

Symbolising in play, gesture and language

Last summer, when Imogen was four years old, her favourite game was doctors. She was the doctor and everyone else became a patient and was called in to her surgery for their appointment. Firstly Imogen set up a room. She set up a chair behind a table, and put a notepad, pen and a piece of card as a computer keyboard, on the table. At the side of the table was the chair for the patient. She found whatever was to hand (depending on where she was playing) to act as a stethoscope, syringe, medicine bottle and spoon.

Once the room was set up Imogen called out 'Next' from inside the room and someone had to go in to see the doctor. Patients were greeted by her standing straight and tall, then gesturing toward the chair with a sweep of her hand before she sat down herself. The consultation began with Imogen asking 'How can I help you?' in a slow, serious voice, her head tilted slightly to one side and a short nod as she spoke.

Once the problem had been explained Imogen tapped on the 'keyboard' with two fingers, made her diagnosis and treated the patient. This involved using the props that she had to give an injection or medicine or listen to the patient's chest. This was completed in silence with knowing looks and nods of the head.

Finally, she made a series of strokes on a sheet of paper and handed it to the patient with the words 'Here is your prescription.' She then called the next patient with a shout of 'Next'. This was repeated tens, perhaps hundreds, of times over the summer. In this repeated play sequence Imogen demonstrated her developing ability to symbolise. She used gesture, voice, body position and movement to represent being the doctor. She used what was to hand to represent the doctor's instruments and engage in medical procedures. She recorded her diagnosis by representing it in writing, entering it into the computer, and using her emergent writing on the prescription. In these ways she showed that she was able to use one thing to represent another. This ability will support Imogen's later literacy learning as she is increasingly able engage with the symbolic representation of speech in the form of reading and writing.

Learning about forms and functions of print

Their developing ability to symbolise enables children to become increasingly aware of the use of symbols, including print, in environmental print, story books and in the digital environment. These symbols, including print, become increasingly meaningful to children as they interact with them in meaningful ways in their everyday lives. Young children's engagement with print enables them to come

to know why, and where, reading and writing are used. At this early stage this is about coming to know what print is, what it is used for and, broadly, how it works. This is often referred to as the functions and forms of print. An early understanding of these functions and forms is important so that emergent literacy in children's play, and later more formal literacy learning, is set in a meaningful context.

Children are exposed to a wealth of environmental print, for example on packaging, as advertising, on household appliances and controls, as print on clothing, through digital technology on phones, computers and other hand-held devices, as shop signs and logos. Neumann et al.'s (2011) review of evidence on the role of environmental print in emergent literacy suggests that environmental print can play an important role in literacy development. They conclude that interaction with environmental print will develop children's logographic reading skills, which in turn will promote emergent literacy skills and conventional reading skills.

Engagement with books is another vital aspect of children's earliest engagement with print. Reading books to children contributes to them becoming aware of print. Through exposure to books children can, among other things, come to differentiate between drawing, writing and pictures, understand that print is a transcript of oral language, become aware that print carries a story and recognise the intonation, patterns and gestures involved in reading.

In addition, to be fully literate children need to be digitally literate. As digital technology is increasingly part of young children's lives, they need opportunities to develop this aspect of their literacy. At home and in their community it is highly likely that children will have opportunities to become aware of print in the digital environment through the use of telephones, computers, tablets, game consoles and other electronic devices. This more inclusive definition of literacy also needs to be a feature of their experience in pre-school settings, to enable children to develop the necessary breadth of print awareness. Beschorner and Hutchinson (2013), in their study which investigated the use of iPads in two pre-school classrooms, concluded that providing iPads in addition to traditional print enabled the children to extend their print awareness, interacting with, organising, and analysing meanings of the print in this situational context. They found that the children created varying forms of writing in the digital environment of the iPad:

For example, children were able to write using letters or symbols and/or write drawings using several apps. The Doodle Buddy and Drawing Pad apps were both frequently used by students to write messages using letters and/or drawings formed on the screen using their finger, typed text using the keyboard, digital stickers or stamps, and photographs taken with the iPad. (Beschorner and Hutchinson, 2013, p.6)

Metalinguistic awareness and knowledge

Another important aspect of looking after very young children's literacy is the development of metalinguistic knowledge. Metalinguistic awareness is the early stage of metalinguistic knowledge. It is the ability to think and talk about language. Initially children learn and use language in functional ways – to communicate with others, to get things that they want and to manage others. Language in these instances is used in an implicit, unanalysed way. Metalinguistic awareness is children's growing ability to 'see' language beyond this functional use, to switch attention from the functional

use of language, and focus on the language itself. It requires that children learn to think about and manipulate the structural features of language (Lightsey and Frye, 2004). Young children therefore need opportunities to enable them to become aware of aspects of language and then to use this knowledge as they move into becoming literate.



Case study

Developing metalinguistic awareness

Imogen has chosen *The Toy Hospital* (Mills, 1998) as a bedtime story. She loves this book and knows it well. As Imogen passes the book to Helen, her mum, she reads the title out loud tracking her finger along the text on the cover. Helen points out the letter / i / in the word hospital and says, 'There is the letter / i / in the word hospital - /h / o /s/ p / i /t /a /l / - / l / just like / l / for Imogen.'

Helen reads through the book and Imogen listens intently, occasionally joining in under her breath 'TWANNNNNG', 'OWWWWW', 'BLAH-blah BLAH-blah'. At the end of the book Imogen joins in loudly with the final sentence, 'a super-duper, extra bouncy, BRAND NEW TRAMPOLINE', then says, 'I've got a trampoline, but mine is blue.'

Helen replies that, yes she has, and perhaps the story is secretly about Imogen, not a squirrel. Imogen's eyes widen and she laughs as she agrees. Helen then turns back to the beginning of the book and begins again, substituting the word 'squirrel' with 'Imogen'. As they read through the story Helen also substitutes other words, 'She ran upstairs to phone for an ambulance' becomes 'She ran upstairs to phone for a yacht' and 'You'd better see a doctor straight away' becomes 'You'd better see an astronaut straight away'. Initially Imogen laughs at the substitutions and corrects her, but soon she joins in adding her own implausible substitutions.

At the point in the story when Squirrel/Imogen is in the hospital Imogen joins in with the story, taking on the voice of the squirrel. And, copying her mum, she changes the text, so instead of telling the doctor 'My leg is hurting' she changes it to 'My foot is broken'.

Helen finishes reading the book by extending the final sentence to 'a super duper, extra boingy, bouncy, brilliant, blue trampoline', and Imogen copies and repeats the sentence over and over again. They chat briefly about how bouncy and boingy Imogen's trampoline is as she snuggles down to sleep.

In this interaction Imogen is learning about language. Helen alerts Imogen to details of language, such as the particular words chosen to describe the squirrel and the trampoline, and they play with language in her substitution of other words and creation of alliterative strings. Helen draws Imogen's attention to letters and words in a concrete and meaningful way. She models the constituent parts of words (phonemes, graphemes), and how we build up and break down words to read (segment and blend). The awareness of language that comes from this engagement alerts Imogen to structure and meaning in language: that it consists of words, and that words have meaning and that these words and meanings can be analysed and discussed (Neaum, 2017). This supports Imogen's knowledge about language, her metalinguistic awareness, which is vital to becoming literate with ease and success.

Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness is another important aspect of looking after young children's literacy. Phonological awareness refers to the ability to identify and manipulate units of oral language. This includes the ability to identify and make oral rhymes, and awareness of aspects of language such as words, syllables and onsets-rimes. Children's ability to identify and manipulate oral language in these ways demonstrates a developing awareness of the detail within spoken language and the ability to focus on aspects of language beyond meaning.

Therefore to look after young children's early literacy development they need to be involved in interaction and experiences that provide opportunities to develop phonological awareness. In their early years this involves opportunities to listen and respond to a wide range of sound, to tune into sounds, to develop sensitivity to what they hear, to begin to discriminate between sounds, and to respond to, and talk about, what they hear. All of this anticipates phonological awareness. This may include listening to and making music, physical movement and dance in response to sound and music, attending to environmental sounds, and creating and listening to stories and poems with sound effects. In addition, young children need to develop sensitivity to rhyme and alliteration through engagement with stories, rhymes, riddles, songs and poems and in language play to 'tune' their ear into the sound of rhyme and alliteration. This needs to continue and increase in complexity through early childhood and children need to be encouraged to think and talk about the rhymes and alliteration.

Finally, and only when they are capable of achieving this, to look after young children's literacy and enable them to become literate, children need to acquire phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is the 'the ability to focus on and manipulate sounds (phonemes) in spoken words' (National Reading Panel (NRP), 2000: 2.1). It is one part of the broader knowledge and skills that constitute phonological awareness, and usually appears after children are able to detect rhyme and identify and manipulate other aspects of language such as words, syllables and onset-rime.

The evidence for the importance of phonemic awareness in becoming literate is compelling. Indeed phonemic awareness has been shown to be the most important prerequisite for learning to read (Melby-Lervåg et al., 2012; Adams, 1990). Adams (1990) observes that the extent to which children have learned to hear phonemes as individual and separate speech sounds will strengthen their ability to see individual letters and spelling patterns. And, conversely, the extent to which they have not learned to hear the phonemes will limit their ability. Adams refers to this as a 'double or nothing return'. Melby-Lervåg et al. (2012) conclude similarly: that the relationship between phonemic awareness and learning to read may be a causal one, in that adequate phonemic skill may be a prerequisite for learning to read effectively. To achieve this young children will need some explicit teaching. However, this more explicit teaching should be play based and enjoyable as children need to experience a significant degree of success in these early attempts with oral recognition of phonemes prior to the introduction of phonics. This could include games focused on hearing and identifying particular phonemes, such as feely bags, parachute games and ring games; tablet-, whiteboard- and electronic toy-based activities and games focused on oral recognition of phonemes; books, rhymes and songs that use alliteration; sound walks, indoors and outdoors; identifying, collecting or taking photos of items indoors and out that begin with a particular phoneme; treasure hunts where children have to find items and orally identify the initial sound; treasure boxes in which children collect items that begin with an identified phoneme (Neaum, 2017).

The Matthew effect in literacy

Stanovich (1986) writes of the 'Matthew effect' in literacy. The Matthew effect references the biblical verse Matthew 25: 29, 'The Parable of the Talents':

For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath.

Stanovich (1986) uses this as an analogy for becoming literate: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. He observes that there are accumulated advantages for children whose early experiences are rich in talking and listening and engagement with print. These children tend to move into becoming literate with relative ease and find it engaging and enjoyable. This means that they remain involved and interested in literacy practices and so their literacy skills grow and improve – the rich get richer. In contrast, children whose early experiences are more limited are more likely to find becoming literate more difficult. They are therefore less likely to engage with literacy for enjoyment and with interest, and, consequently, less likely to develop fluent, effective literacy skills – the poor get poorer (Neaum, 2017).

So, if we are to look after young children's early literacy acquisition and development we need to look beyond the obvious explicit teaching of literacy skills and knowledge and towards what we know about what enables young children to come to school-based learning – and literacy learning – with a high chance of success. Our understanding of how we look after young children's literacy needs to recognise that becoming literate is not a discrete set of disconnected skills, but starts in a child's earliest years, in the quality of their relationships and in early experiences that are vital in anticipation of later literacy learning.



Concluding thoughts

This chapter has outlined some of the vital relationships and experiences that lead into becoming literate and has emphasised the importance of these in enabling young children to come to school-based learning, including literacy learning, with a high chance of success. It argues that it is in these ways that we look after young children's literacy.

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